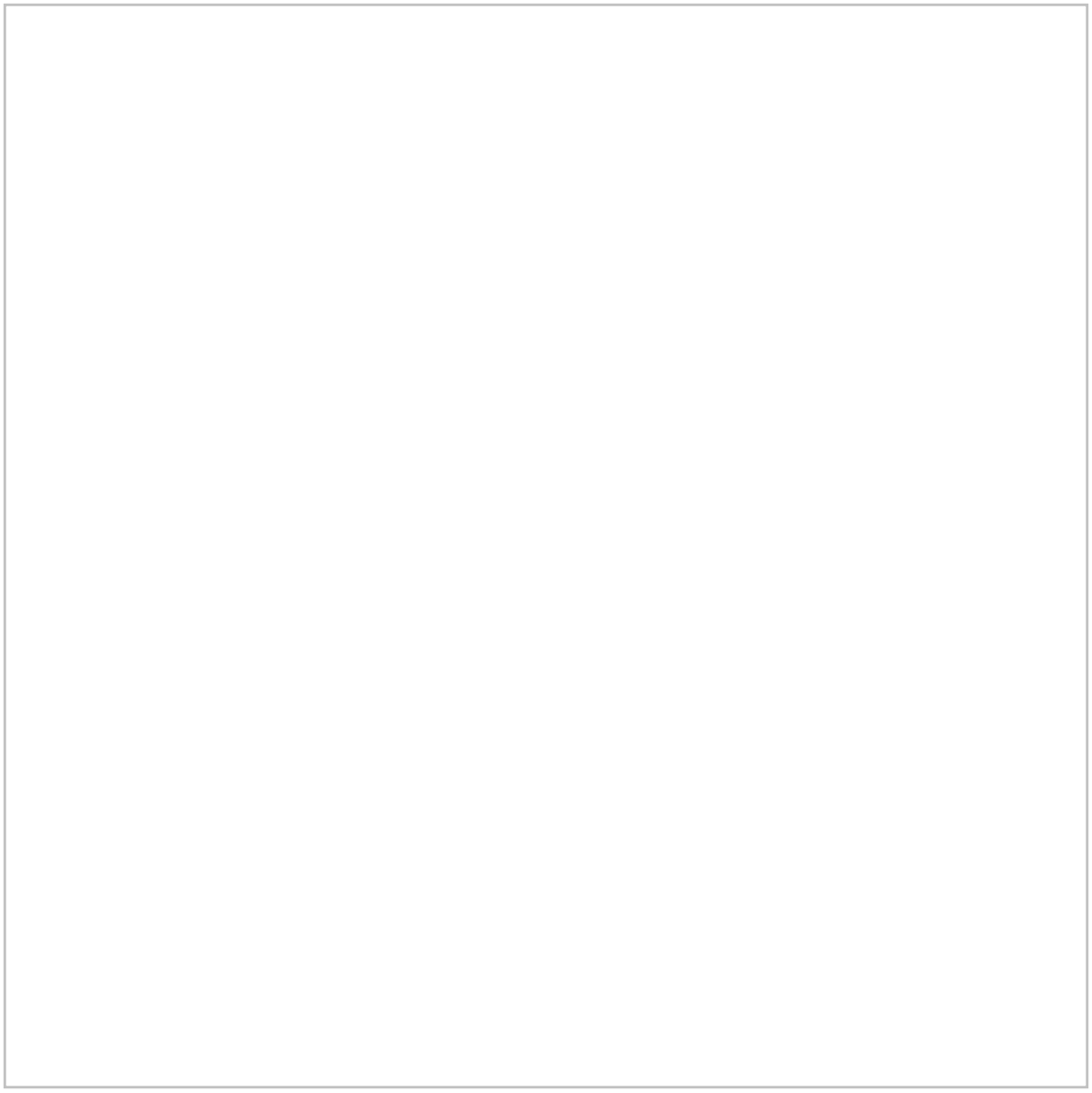
From:	Christy Agner
To:	Ben Pendry; Chris Williams; Kelli Brown; Kyle Pifer; Melissa Wargo; Mike Byers; Rich Price; Richard Starnes; Sam Miller; Shea Browning; William Moultrie
Subject:	NC Tribune + partner news, week of Feb. 9-20, Congressional interactions, NCGA critter chatter
Date:	Friday, February 20, 2026 6:54:34 PM
Attachments:	Weekly Federal Recap for February 13 2026.msg

Team, please see the NC Tribune + partner news for the weeks of Feb. 9-20. We've had a brisk two weeks – thanks to all who have contributed to our federal and state advocacy activities. WCU grabbed a visit from Congressman Edwards this week while the House was on District Work period, and got some solid connections at NCGA with the distribution of the economic catalyst/ impact piece. For our giggle of the week, including this raccoon (I think it's a raccoon?) experience at the NCGA, which appears to be alarming to folks. I am more alarmed to know that a news outlet has access to the security camera at the front security entrance of the legislative building. Gotta put on that smile right away after you come through TSA! Also, why are the lights on in a state building at night…..energy efficiency folks!
Enjoy – Christy



Comment: *Right by the security station at the front of the building. Oh, and by the way, he had to have gotten through three ceilings.*

Federal

- The shutdown for agencies funded through the **Homeland Security appropriations** has affected non-essential functions in customs and border protection, cybersecurity, FEMA (including the grant portal), the National Flood Insurance Program, ICE, TSA, Coast Guard, and Intelligence (security clearance work)
- **US DOE** announced resolutions with 31 or 45 institutions of higher education to end the Ph.D Project, which '*provided students with 'insights into obtaining a Ph.D, but…limits eligibility based on the race of the participants. OCR reports ongoing negotiations with the remaining 14 schools'* NC institutions involved in the resolutions include Duke University.
- **US DOE** has issued an 'urge' to higher education institutions in improving loan repayment outcomes through' *outreach to former students*.'

Congress: The House and Senate were on a district work period this week. No DC Congressional action was scheduled. Congressman Chuck Edwards, his Education Policy staff and District Director visited Chancellor Brown and the College of Engineering on Thursday morning for discussion on workforce initiative updates and higher education priorities at the Congressional and Federal Agency level. Last week. Engineering Dean Collins and Christy attended DC meetings for Engineering Deans around the country. NC Deans led a session with Congs. Deborah Ross and David Rouzer, as well as NCSU Chancellor Kevin Howell, on the value of Engineering programs to state economic development efforts. A group of NC Engineering Deans from WCU, ECU, A&T, Duke, UNCC and NCSU lobbied jointly on the Hill. Of the 16 NC delegation members, our group met with 5 members and 12 NC delegation member offices.

State Agencies

- Governor Stein has appointed Casey Smith (Burke County) to the **North Carolina Recreational Therapy Licensure Board:** Smith is a licensed recreational therapy assistant at Broughton Hospital in Morganton, with priorities through leisure education, team building, and psycho education.
- NC Department of Environmental Quality has expanding the Cost-Saving Energy Program to all 100 Counties
- DNCR announced a Feb. 27 America250 event in Buncombe County. The *When Are We US? An America 250 Symposium*." Event is free

NCGA

WNC House members released a statement about DOT standards for private road and bridge rebuilds. The following statement was issued by: Reps. Karl Gillespie (R- Macon), Dudley Greene (R- Avery 0, Rep. Mark Pless (R- Haywood), Rep. Mike Clampitt (R- Swain), Rep. Jake Johnson (R- Polk), Rep. Jennifer Balkcom (R- Henderson), Rep. Ray Pickett (R- Watauga) "*While the NC General Assembly has appropriated a historic amount of funds to help Western North Carolinians rebuild private roads and bridges, Governor Stein has presided over a stifling bureaucracy utterly lacking in common sense and resourcefulness. Overly complex bridge and road designs have slowed projects to an unacceptable pace and dramatically increased the costs of repairs and replacements. We are working to remove these barriers so Western NC can recover more quickly and more households can receive state funds*."

House Select Committee on Government Efficiency compelled attendance from Buncombe and Asheville leaders related to alleged DEI. Presentations for Buncombe County and the City of Asheville are here . State Auditor Dave Bolik provided an update on long term vacancies and lapsed salary reporting for state agencies.

Justice Public Safety Oversight met last week, hearing from various law enforcement agencies re: salary matters related to recruitment and retention. Some good insight in the presentations on market salary ranges for law enforcement in western NC compared to other states.

House Committee om Property Tax reduction and reform. Presentations on 'overview of recent federal funding and cost shift changes / impact on local governments' and 'Nonprofit property tax exemptions: Hospitals' are lined for review. These items are helpful for context in understanding pressures and expectations of future NCGA budgets. This meeting was very well attended by members and included discussions about the perception of non-core funding at the County Commission level on items that are not 'mission critical' which include support for non-profits, duplicative services and land development. Meeting agendas and presentations are available here.

Joint Education Oversight heard from Gaston College NC Center of Applied Textile Technology, several tutoring programs and a presentation on math curriculum and scores from NC Dept. of Public Instruction. Several of the programs received earmarks in previous budgets and all are asking for enhanced recurring public funds to continue their work.

Partners and Statewide Media

NCImpact (UNC School of Government) is hosting a Drivers of Change webinar, featuring Daniel Manring, ED of the Tuckaseigee Water and Sewer Authority on the topic of Txklinf the Water Workforce challenge

NC County Commissioner Association's (NCACC) monthly data analysis: Department of Veterans Affairs report on veterans by county, Jackson's 8.5 %is in range with Haywood and Macon 9.7%. Buncombe and Swain are 6.7% and 5.7%,respectively. NCACC announced Macon County is seeking a Social Services Director.

NCACC has scheduled its regional meeting in Jackson County for March 4 and its regional County Risk Group meeting in Jackson County for April 1st. This is a good opportunity for students engaged in risk management and insurance program academic work to shadow.

AssemblyNC 's article on How Much Could Trump's Cuts Cost Your College? As this is a subscription based service, the full article is attached. The database embedded in the article lists WCU's 'high loss estimate at .28% and 'low loss estimate' as .09%.

The Assembly pens '5 Takeaways from our analysis of Trump's Higher Ed Cuts' It covers efforts to reduce indirect cost rates, administration slow pace of grant awards for federal funding to higher education, impact of Parent PLUS and Grad PLUS loan changes and the impact of uncertainty.

Center for Academic Renewal pens several articles on UNC Tuition and Accreditor / state law interactions Excerpt *[Members of the North Carolina General Assembly have spent years pursuing higher-education reform and reclaiming authority over the state's university system. Legislators in other states have done likewise. Yet another actor still quietly shapes higher-education policy: accreditation agencies. Unelected accreditors and their private organizations influence university governance, hiring decisions, and the mandating of DEI courses and initiatives—all without democratic accountability. North Carolina is well-positioned to make clear that, when state law conflicts with accreditor "standards" or "regulations," state law must prevail.It is clear that accreditor overreach undermines state authority. What remains unclear is whether state lawmakers will reassert their lawful authority…. With its unified public-university system and reform-minded legislators, North Carolina is well-positioned to lead on this issue—and to make clear that, when state law conflicts with accreditor "standards" or "regulations," state law must prevail…A good start would be passing the Martin Center's model Accreditation Choice Act, which explicitly prohibits accreditors from compelling institutions to violate state laws.]*

EducationNC shared As NC prepares for Workforce Pell, only a fraction of short-term programs are expected to qualify. *States play a critical role in Workforce Pell Grants, as eligible programs are first approved by the governor. Learn more about where North Carolina stands in its preparation for the new funding, which will support short-term workforce training programs. Excerpt [during a Feb. 11 meeting of the Governor's Council on Workforce and Apprenticeships, Jeff Cox, president of the N.C. Community College System, expressed caution about the number of programs that may ultimately qualify for Workforce Pell in the state due to the program's federally established eligibility criteria. Eligible programs must demonstrate a 70% completion rate, a 70% job placement rate within 180 days, and a positive return on investment, demonstrated through a value-added earnings requirement. "Just out of these initial screens — the number of hours and then the job placement and the completion rates — I think only about 4% or so of our overall short-term credential programs are going to qualify," Cox said….the N.C. Community College System (NCCCS)*

has already published an initial list of potentially eligible programs, which is part of the system's Workforce Pell toolkit. This list includes short-term workforce courses and credentials that meet the time limits required by Workforce Pell — but not all of those programs will necessarily meet the grant's additional eligibility requirements..]

Carolina Journal Underused campus polling sites spark debate. Includes quotes and analysis from Dr. Chris Cooper, some of which relates to past performance at the WCU early vote site.

Jackson County

Commission meeting updates from Feb. 3 and 17th include:

- Cullowhee Fire Station costs related to serving WCU and the immediate area drew some questions (Commissioner Hooper), related to negotiating with WCU to pay more 'share of the costs.' I could not access the public documents to determine what the non-profit fire account alleged in regard to potential deficits in their budget.
- TDA Capital project approvals:

  Pinnacle Park trail expansion for Phase 2 master plan ($341k) implementation to include paved trailhead, toilet and outdoor classroom. Referred to the enhanced ability to host university researchers with the upgraded facilities.

  Village Green restroom project ($425k Jackson County investment as matching plan). Doesn't add new room overnights, but 'supports' them.
- NOTICE OF SPECIAL JOINT MEETING March 10, 6 pm at SCC. The Jackson County Board of Commissioners, Town of Sylva, Town of Dillsboro, Town of Webster and Village of Forest Hills will hold a special joint work session. This purpose of the joint work session is to discuss topics of interest.

Statewide News

The NC Selectsite Readiness Program will try to expand on its success in recruiting industry to the state by adding five locations, all of them in western North Carolina, the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina announced Thursday. The five new locations, picked from 18 submissions, are concentrated in areas recovering from the effects of Hurricane Helene in September 2024. Read more in this report. The five new locations are: Alexander County Rail Sites in Hiddenite, Great Meadows in Morganton (Burke County)m Project Shift in Sylva (Jackson County), Mitchell Business Park in Spruce Pine, ECMD in Wilkesboro (Wilkes County)

Port City Java sold to Louisiana-based owner *(WilmingtonBiz)* Wilmington-founded Port City Java is now owned by PCJ Holdings LLC, a Louisiana-based entity, as of Jan. 30. Financial terms weren't disclosed. The new owner will be supported by The Franchise Business Management Group, which manages several national brands. Company leaders say locations and staffing will remain unchanged.

North Carolina energy sector leaders are trying to decide how to adapt to surging demand for power from data centers in a way that is fair to consumers, Duke Energy and the tech companies that are powering so much economic growth. A preliminary report from Gov. Josh Stein's Energy Policy Task

Force emphasizes that the bipartisan group is advocating that policymakers make sure data centers pay their fair share for the stress imposed on the grid. While those sites that power AI account for about 30% of the projects looking to expand in our state, they account for about 80% of the additional demand Duke Energy is expecting in the coming years. The alternative is watching rates rise "on all customers unless the primary users of new infrastructure bear the cost burden," according to the task force's new report. Duke already has special tariffs for "high load factor customers" who need at least 1 megawatt of power, and includes a demand that they pay for at least 75% of the power they contract for, regardless of whether they actually use it.State regulators and lawmakers face pressure to add modifications that will offer more protection against potential cross-subsidies landing on residential ratepayers. But the task force cautioned that there's a risk of discouraging large businesses from siting operations in the state. A final report is expected next year, though lawmakers and regulators may act more quickly on some of the issues detailed so far. Read more in this report**.**

The House's property-tax committee is scrutinizing the tax breaks North Carolina gives its nonprofit hospitals, but a couple of its rank-and-file members are speaking up against the idea of making major changes. Legislative staffers on Wednesday told the panel the property and sales-tax breaks the hospitals receive cost city and county governments across the state a combined $215 million in fiscal 2024-25 They also pointed out that other states aren't necessarily as generous. Texas, for example, conditions its property tax break on a hospital's level of charity care, service to rural areas and Medicaid patients, and their willingness to serve patient regardless of their willingness to pay. "So some questions for this body to consider [include] whether a minimum level of charitable care should be required in the statute," said Zoey Howe of the Legislative Analysis Division. She went on that if so, legislators would have to decide "whether that is measured in dollar amounts or a percentage of care given." Beyond that, there's also a question about "whether there is a desire to require hospitals to just be more transparent about the ways that they provide charitable care within their communities. "But Reps. Grant Campbell and Keith Kidwell, Republicans from Cabarrus and Beaufort counties respectively, both said changing the exemption would hurt rural healthcare. "If we're going to start shifting their balance sheets and we're going to start making these endeavors that we're hoping that they will do have a higher long-term cost, we have to expect that some of these endeavors in rural healthcare are going to decrease and go away," said Campbell, an Atrium Health obstetrician. Kidwell added that in his part of the state, ECU Health creates "a massive number of jobs," revenue and "ancillary services. "So we have to be careful there in how we address that situation," he said, adding that hospitals would simply pass the added costs along to their patients. There are 119 licensed hospitals in North Carolina, with 75 of them being nonprofits, legislative staffers say. Not counted in the nonprofit total, obviously, are for-profits like Mission Hospitals in Asheville. Also not counted in the 75: Atrium, as it's really the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Hospital Authority, an arm of the government that's inherently exempt from taxation.

Higher Education News

Today's number: $61.6 million That's how much money Duke University received in FY 23 in R&D money from the Department of Defense, tops among North Carolina's universities, according to the most recent National Science Foundation Higher Education and Research Development Survey (2024). NC State leads the UNC System in defense research, with projects funded by DoD totaling

$49 million in annual expenditures. That represents a 45% increase since 2019. UNC Chapel Hill had $26.9 million in FY 23. Western swing for EDPNC:

Sports wagering clears quarter-billion to state coffers Alan Wooten/The Center Square More than a quarter-billion dollars has been generated for North Carolina coffers by sports wagering revenue since becoming legal in March 2024. January produced the fourth-largest month on record, according to figures from the North Carolina Lottery Commission. With $14,460,977 for state coffers, the 23 months of legalized gambling has brought the state $251,741,956 – an average of $363,788 per day. After two cratered months of summer to start the fiscal year, five consecutive months have yielded no less than $400,000 per day averages. The total this fiscal year is $85.7 million – a pace for $147 million by the close of books June 30. The state Office of Budget and Management forecast the state to benefit by $74.9 million in fiscal year 2025 and $142 million in fiscal year 2026. The first full year was 55.7% higher. For perspective on state revenue, the individual income tax is the state's largest revenue source and its increase in fiscal year 2025 was more than $637 million.[Read more here]

Judge denies demands for early voting sites on three NC university campuses Sarah Michels/Carolina Public Press The College Democrats of North Carolina and several students from Western Carolina University, North Carolina Agricultural & Technical State University and University of North Carolina-Greensboro sued in late January, after election boards did not include campus sites in their early voting plans. They argued that excluding campus early voting sites made voting more difficult for younger voters and college students, who may lack reliable transportation options, time and voting information at a higher rate than the general population. WCU has hosted early voting consistently since 2016, while NC A&T and UNC-Greensboro have never been chosen for midterm election cycles, although they have been included in presidential primary and general election early voting plans in the past. [Read more here]

NCSU involved in "Golden Dome" anti-missile project NC State has a chance to participate in a $151 billion federally funded R&D program designed to bolster the country's defenses against missile attacks. The Defense Department's Missile Defense Agency in December and January qualified 2,440 companies and universities to compete for grants under what it's calling the "Scalable Homeland Innovative Enterprise Layered Defense" or SHIELD program. NCSU was in the initial tranche of 1,014 qualifications, announced on Dec. 2. It was one of but four universities in the group, the others being Purdue, Alabama and Colorado. Subsequent tranches announced on Dec. 18 and Jan. 15 have added George Mason, South Florida, Florida State, Northeastern, Wichita State, Tennessee, Central Florida, Auburn, Texas-El Paso, Texas Tech, Alabama A&M, Notre Dame, Dayton, Northern Arizona, New York University, Georgia, West Florida and Missouri to the list. The trade publication *Breaking Defense* reported in December that the feds have yet to award any funds as "the qualifying vendors will compete to win contracts for specific task orders laying out requirements." NCSU spokesman Mick Kulikowski confirmed that, adding on Friday that the competition "should begin after a meeting held in the next two weeks." The program is part of the Trump administration's so-called "Golden Dome" project, which aims to create a "next-generation missile defense shield" that can cope with weapons going well beyond just the ballistic missiles of the Cold War. It should be capable of also defending against hypersonic and advanced cruise missiles, "and other next-generation aerial attack" weapons, Trump has said. The administration

envisions it including new sensors, "space-based interceptors" alongside ground-based counters and "non-kinetic capabilities," and a supply chain to support its operation. What exactly it's looking for from NCSU and other vendors remains unclear through *Breaking Defense* says it's seen a PowerPoint that listed 19-plus "areas of interest." These include "prototyping, weapon design, cybersecurity, systems engineering and data mining," the publication said. The Missile Defense Agency itself says it envisions work continuing through December 2035. NCSU has said only that SHIELD involves "a broad range of work areas that allows for the rapid delivery of innovative capabilities to the warfighter with increased speed and agility." The Raleigh university also stresses that it's already involved in defense research, to the tune of about $49 million as of 2024. It has a Level 2 cybersecurity certification, an intermediate level that goes beyond basic safeguards of information related to federal contracts

Methodist University president announces 2027 retirement *(Greater Fayetteville Business Journal)* Methodist University President Stanley T. Wearden plans to retire June 30, 2027, after more than eight years leading the Fayetteville school. His tenure included growth in online programs, stronger student success metrics and launch of the Cape Fear Valley Health School of Medicine, with trustees beginning a leadership succession search.

UNC says Carolina North won't damage the forest. Environmental experts worry about unintended impacts. Juliet Loffredo/The Daily Tar Heel After Chancellor Lee Roberts announced on Jan. 21 that UNC would move forward with the development of Carolina North, a satellite campus 2 miles off of UNC's main campus, some community members have raised concerns about the construction project's potential impacts on the Carolina North Forest. The Carolina North Forest comprises 750 acres of hiking trails, wildlife and historical sites. A part of the forest lies around the area proposed for development. At the UNC Employee Forum meeting on Feb. 6, Roberts said the 250 acres that the University plans to develop do not implicate the forest or the trail network. According to the Carolina North website, any potential construction impacts on the trails near the development site will be limited, communicated and organized alongside the community. The University has not explicitly stated which parts, if any, of the forest are included in design plans. **[Read more here]**

New textile consortium The Defense Department is seeking **proposals** to manage a new "Revolutionary Fibers and Textiles Consortium (RFTC)," with both NC State University and RTI International as interest parties, our correspondent Dan Barkin reports. The government previously had a consortium agreement with **AFFOA,** Advanced Functional Fabrics of America, in Massachusetts. Basically, the DoD would fund R&D through Other Transaction Authority agreements, and the new consortium would manage the operation. North Carolina is the center for much of the domestic textile and fiber industry in the U.S., and the Wilson College of Textiles at NC State, a national leader in textile education. The Office of Secretary of Defense (OSD) Manufacturing Technology Program (ManTech) manages a portfolio of DoD Manufacturing Innovation Institutes (MIIs). There is a major Defense Department focus on

boosting the U.S. textile and clothing supply chains. The military buys a lot of clothing and components, and struggles to maintain enough suppliers. As well, the demands of a global military footprint require new types of clothing and gear for warfighters, **particularly for the Arctic**. Much of the U.S. textile and apparel industry was devastated as jobs went overseas, particularly to China over the past 30 years. Every year, at the annual **FEDTEX** conference held by the North Carolina Military Business Center, military leaders say they need more textile and apparel suppliers competing for their contracts, and, particularly, more advanced manufacturing and innovation in that space, particularly wearables.
The NSF North Carolina Textile Innovation Engine, based in Morganton, was set up to help revive the NC textile industry through research, innovation and workforce development. NC State has been a key partner in this initiative. At least one other entity is interested in landing the consortium. Advanced Technology International of Summerville, South Carolina, **has indicated** it is "building a consortium of premier nontraditional and traditional government contractors, nonprofit and for-profit institutions, academic organizations, and small and large businesses to advance and scale critical manufacturing processes for revolutionary fibers and textiles." ATI manages around 30 different consortia. Note: A version of this story first appeared in NC Military Report. To subscribe to the NC Military Report, click **here**.

Regional News

Harsh winter takes toll on home-heating countywide Sarah White/The Waynesville Mountaineer This winter's brutal temperatures have taken a toll on utility bills across the county. As temperatures dropped, heaters kicked on and stayed on — driving up energy usage and costs. "The last month has been cold, and many have said their heaters haven't turned off in days," said Si Simmons, program director at Mountain Projects. "I believe we'll hear from an overwhelming number of households that need support to help pay these bills – especially if temperatures bottom out again." Organizations like Mountain Projects and Haywood Christian Ministries can help homeowners pay their bills to ensure their heat or power stays on through the winter. But this year's unusually cold weather and rising utility costs have put a strain on the nonprofits' funds. "We're seeing a big increase in families asking for help with power bills," said Samantha Moore, intake specialist at Mountain Projects. "Electric rates went up twice last year, and monthly costs are running between $400 and $900." **[Read more here]**

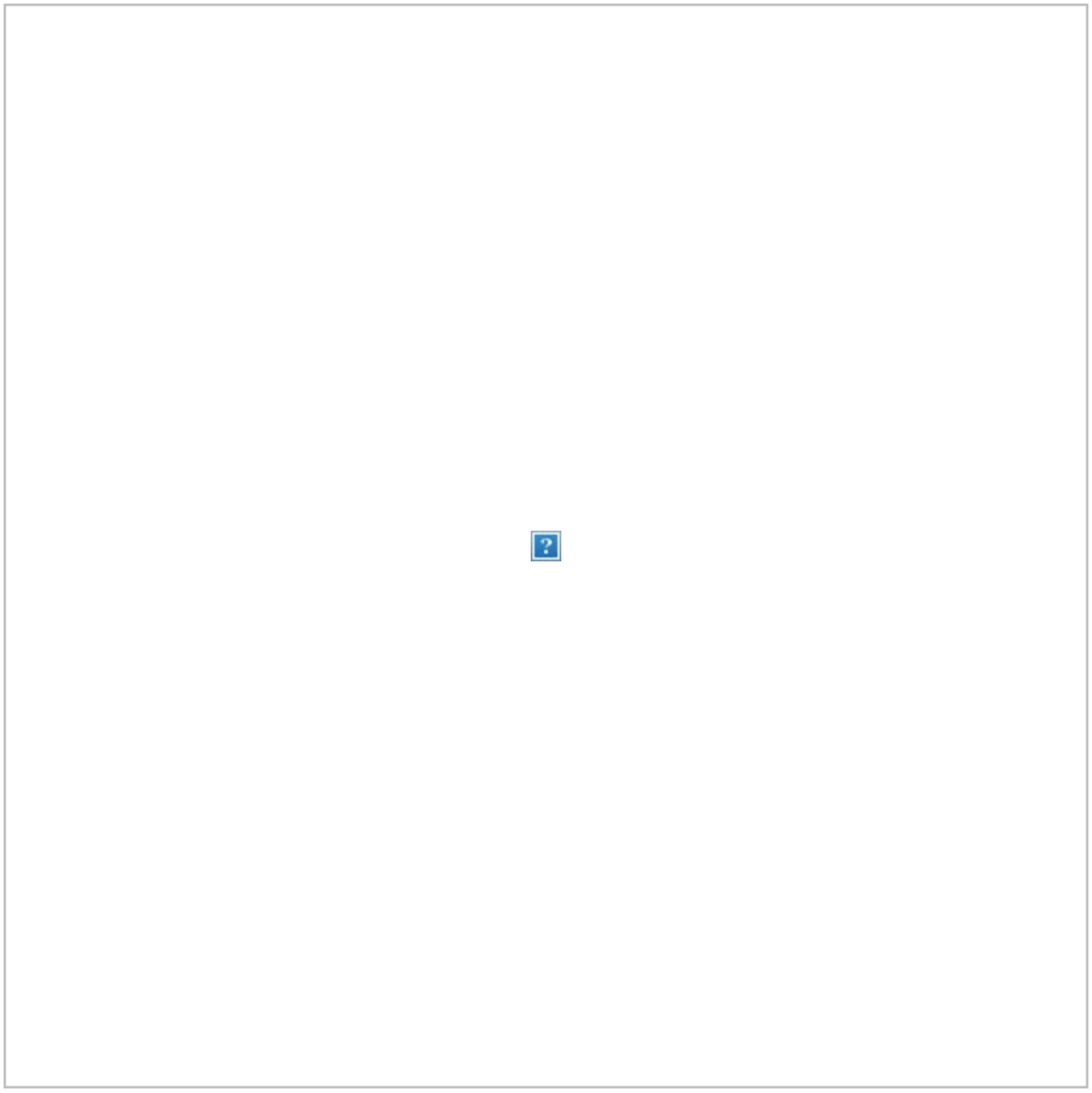
Road & Bridge Repair Estimates from Helene Continue to Rise North Carolina is still awaiting the arrival of federal funds for Tropical Storm Helen recovery – and the estimated cost and scope of some repairs continues to rise. On February 9, the Governor's Advisory Committee on Western North Carolina Recovery held a meeting to investigate both the number and cost of private road and bridge repair projects in the region. The newly estimated cost is over $500 million, and only $175 million has been allocated to the program thus far. Since launching in 2025, the program has repaired 17 bridges, 16 roadways and 18 pipes or culverts; currently, there are an additional 236 additional projects in progress. The total number of such projects is currently estimated at 8,000. Tropical Storm Helene caused an estimated $60 billion in

damage to the region. And as of December 31, 2025, about $10.1 billion in both state and federal funds has been spent on recovery.

The G20 comes to Asheville Asheville will host some of the **preparatory meetings** for the annual G20 summit in August and early September, U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent says. The sessions will begin on Aug. 29 and 30 with meetings between the top deputies of each participating country's finance ministry and central bank. The actual finance ministers and central-bank governors will confer on Aug. 31 and Sept. 1, Treasury Department officials say. The "Finance Track" meetings are supposed to lay the groundwork for a presidential-level summit in Miami that's scheduled for December. The U.S. is hosting the sessions for the first time since 2009. Bessent said the objectives include steps to:

- Modernizing financial regulation.
- Strengthen understanding of excessive global imbalances.
- Enhance debt transparency and facilitate debt-restructuring processes.
- Endorse "a vibrant digital assets ecosystem."
- Improve cross-border payments and address payments fraud and scams.
- And promote financial literacy.

A first round of preparatory meetings is scheduled for April in Washington, D.C. After the Asheville sessions, there will be one more advance meeting in October, in Bangkok. Bessent's announcement also stressed that having Asheville host "reflects the Trump administration's commitment to the revitalization and resilience of western North Carolina." The announcement made no mention of the exact venue. Obvious potential choices include such facilities as the Grove Park Inn or the Inn on the Biltmore Estate. Officials from the Grove Park and the Inn hadn't responded to email queries as of late Thursday afternoon. Federal officials floated a **request for host cities** in early 2025. The G20 includes the major countries of North America, Europe, the Middle East, Asia and Africa. The U.S. **boycotted** the most recent summit, held in South Africa this past November.



Tribal court hearing for former Swain sheriff delayed Lucas Thomae/Carolina Public Press A jury trial for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians' prosecution of former Swain County sheriff Curtis Cochran won't be scheduled until at least this summer, according to the latest tribal court filings. Cochran, 73, had been set to appear in tribal court in Cherokee on Tuesday, Feb. 17. However, the judge presiding over the case, the tribal prosecutor and Cochran's attorney agreed over email to continue the pre-trial hearing to June 8, assistant clerk Keanu Crowe told Carolina Public Press. In the motion for continuation filed Tuesday morning, defense attorney Jack Stewart cited Cochran's "age and poor health" as reasoning for him not to appear Tuesday. Cochran was arrested by Cherokee, state and federal authorities last year for sex crimes he's alleged to have committed against multiple women in his police vehicle. **[Read more here]**

Canton passes 12-month moratorium on data centers and cryptocurrency mining Katie Myers/Blue Ridge Public Radio Emotions were high Wednesday night at a public hearing where the Town of Canton's Board of Aldermen passed a 12-month moratorium on new data

center development, server farms and cryptocurrency mining. The hearing was more preventative than reactive. It was prompted by inquiries from out-of-town companies about using the site of the town's decommissioned paper mill for data centers. There are no concrete plans for the paper mill site yet. According to Canton Mayor Zeb Smathers, attendance at town meetings is usually a handful of people who can easily fit in the town hall space. Smathers, the Board of Aldermen and local law enforcement instead found themselves commanding a crowd of at least a hundred. Dozens who couldn't fit in the tight space remained outside in the cold, listening to the meeting blare from a speaker. Many attending expressed concern about energy and water use. **[Read more here]**